

**Sister Rita Vander Velden , OP**  
**Born to earthly life: July 13, 1920**  
**Religious profession: August 4, 1941**  
**Entered eternal life: March 16, 2012**

*My help is from the Lord,  
who made heaven and earth.*  
*Psalm 121:2*



Young Bernice

The words of Psalm 121 above could have been written specifically for Sister Rita Vander Velden. Faith in God's goodness was at the core of her very being. Everyone she knew was blessed with remembrance in her daily prayers, and she made a point of telling them that — often.

Bernice Julietta, the third of nine children born to Gertrude LeRoy and Martin Vander Velden, first saw the light of day in Kimberly, Wisconsin, where she was baptized at Holy Name Church. Like many in Kimberly in those days, her father had emigrated directly from the Netherlands, and she took special pride in her Dutch heritage.

She was only in second grade at Holy Name School when she began to make known her intention to become a sister like her Racine Dominican teachers. Perhaps, she wrote later, that early seed of vocation had been planted during her frequent visits to the chapel of Saint Therese of Lisieux in her parish

church. "Our family pew was in direct line with the chapel," she wrote, "and I had an excellent view of the beautiful stained-glass windows depicting highlights of Therese's life. My fondness for the chapel and its windows never waned as I grew. Throughout my grade



Louise Van Himbergen and Bernice



Eighth Grade Graduation



High School Graduation

and high school years I often prayed there about my vocation.”

Her parents felt she was too young when she asked to let her join the Dominicans after finishing eighth grade. But she had their blessing when, as a senior in high school, she asked Sister Praxedes Geier what she would have to do to prepare to enter Saint Catherine's Convent. On the Feast of Saint Rose of Lima, August 30, 1938, the designated entrance date for postulants, she and her longtime friend Louise Himbergen (later Sister Renée) boarded the

train for Racine. Strange friends they were and would be for life: the free and easy Louise and the straight-laced and proper Rita! At the Racine depot to welcome them were their second and sixth grade teachers, Sisters Dionysia Endres and Dominica Schaaf.

Bernice was received into the novitiate on August 4 the following year, having been given the religious name Sister M. Rita of the Holy Crown of Thorns. She would keep that name for the rest of her life.

Sister Rita began her teaching ministry at Saint Edward's as a senior novice. After her first profession of vows on August 4, 1941, she moved from the motherhouse to Saint Rita's on the north side of Racine, where she must have been thrilled each day to the sight of the statue of her patron saint near the sanctuary in church. The following term, however, she was transferred to Saint Aloysius in Sauk City, where she taught for two years. Then she was back at Saint Edward's for another two. Two-year assignments followed first at Saint Bernard's in



Reception day, 1939

Madison and then at Our Lady of Guadalupe in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

In 1950 she moved back to Wisconsin and began a four-year ministry at Holy Angels in Milwaukee. Meanwhile, she had been spending her summers at Saint Norbert College in DePere, and in 1954 was awarded her undergraduate degree in history. That fall she was sent to Saint Andrew's in Knowles, Wisconsin, where she taught for six years.

During the summers now, Rita was studying theology, and in 1961



About 1945



About 1950



About 1974

immensely, even though it lasted only two years! But then she moved just across the river to Saint John's in

was awarded a Certificate in Theology from Mount Mary College in Milwaukee. She had been transferred in 1960 to Saints Peter and Paul School in Green Bay. In 1964 she returned to Racine, this time to Holy Name Parish for three years. Next her home parish in Kimberly claimed her services for two years — an assignment which must have pleased both her and her family



Discussing the United Farm Workers' cause, 1976

Little Chute, where she would stay until 1972.

In 1971 she received her Reading Specialist Certificate from Marquette University, and in 1972 moved to Saint Catherine's High School for just a year. In 1973 she was once again in Little Chute; this time she would stay for six happy years. 1970s. It was during these years that Rita's passion for justice work took root. When Norbertine priest Robert Cornell was running for a seat in the House of Representatives, she campaigned for him, leafleting house-to-house and putting fliers on cars in the Kimberly Mill parking lot to assure his victory.

She spent several weeks in California in 1976 working alongside César Chavez and farm workers as a protest against the unjustly low wages the workers received for their long hours of labor. She

also supported NETWORK's lobbying efforts, participating in demonstrations for peace and against injustice.



In the library at Saint Catherine's

and periodicals for articles students could use in their research, providing the library with a neatly clipped and catalogued file of articles on more than five hundred timely topics and justice concerns such as hunger, racism, prisons, sexuality, child abuse, war, women's issues, ecology, and terrorism. She also took every opportunity to supply her Racine Dominican sisters with articles relevant to their ministerial interests.

Rita was seventy-four years old when, in 1994, she moved to Siena Center and continued to be active in volunteer ministries such as keeping abreast of

In 1979 she took a position at Holy Angels in Milwaukee, and in 1984 accepted an invitation to join Sister Agnes Ballweg and her classmate Sister Clara Dischler in Ketchikan, Alaska. "Even though it was always cold," she would recall later, "the people and the place were very special." But after a year she moved back to Racine to assist in the library at Saint Catherine's High School. Alongside her other responsibilities, she scoured newspapers



Volunteering at Tutwiler, Mississippi, 2000

political proceeding and writing letters to senators and representatives, considering it her obligation to voice her opinions on issues before the Congress. "As a Dominican," she said, "I am called to this study and contemplation. It is part of the 'fast' Isaiah calls for." She participated in many of the opportunities provided by the Justice and Rights Commission, keeping her "thirst and hunger for justice" alive.

She treasured family and friends throughout her life and always called her siblings, nieces, and nephews for their birthdays and anniversaries. She was seldom happier than when engrossed in a good card game, especially sheephead. Very competitive by nature, Rita so liked to win that others would sometimes deliberately play poorly so that she could. Her sisters would often shop for clothes with her when she visited in Kimberly, but if they bought her more than one outfit, she would protest, "I took the vow of poverty; I don't need another suit! What are my sisters going to think?" And her sister Bette would retort, "So take some other clothes to the swap shop!"

She also treasured being a Racine Dominican. "So many sisters have served so many places for such a long time," she reflected. "We are dedicated to education and to serving people in need. Sisters have helped many people in many different ways through the years." Rita certainly did.

As 2011 turned to 2012, Rita's health and vitality were visibly declining. In mid-February she entered Hospice, and in early March moved to Lakeshore Manor. There she died peacefully in the early morning hours of March 16. She was ninety-one years old. She long said, whenever she passed the collection of photos of recently deceased sisters, "I wish that were me!" Now she had her wish, as her photo at last was added to the collection.

The morning after her funeral liturgy at Siena Center her body was interred in the community plot at Holy Cross Cemetery in Caledonia.



Kimberly Girls, 1991

Sisters Catherine Verbeten, Regina Willams, Therese Van Thull, Rita Vander Velden, Annette Kemps;  
Agnes Rose Kokke, Renée Van Himbergen; Alice and Pat McCormick